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ABSTRACT

The Chicana has traditionally been seen as a silent partner in a marriage and culture: one who is totally subservient to her husband and devoted only to his needs and her children's needs. This research questions if this role is changing and, if so, how and to what degree. A tragedy of the Chicana's future is that the barriers to development are matters of image and self-concept since the Chicana has practically been paralyzed by the stereotyped identity awarded to her by the dominant reference group. The importance of this role as housewife and mother has been overlooked; her power in the domestic sphere is extensive and the Mexican American household can be defined as matrifocal. The Chicana is making adjustments in her role that coincide with the implementation of the sweeping social changes of the 1960's and 1970's in the United States: increased educational attainment is allowing upward socio-economic mobility, weakened influence of the Catholic Church is changing attitudes about birth control and a woman's role outside the home, and increased intermarriage of Hispanics with non-Hispanics is resulting in cultural melding. However, there exists a common desire among those interviewed to maintain and preserve cultural identity. In part of that heritage resides a deep commitment to the home and family. The Chicana is still working for her family and her people whenever possible in the best way available to her; only the sphere of opportunity has changed. (NEC)

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THE CHICANA: TRADITIONAL VALUES IN TRANSITION

A Paper

Presented by

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The Chicana: Traditional Values in Transition

In the past ten years one of the major ethnic voices heard in America, increasingly fervent and effective, has been the voice of the Mexican-American, or Chicano. Most of the spokesmen for the group have been male voices. Little has been heard from the Mexican-American woman, the Chicana. She has traditionally been seen as a silent partner in a marriage and culture; one who is totally subservient to her husband and devoted only to his needs and her children's needs. She was not seen as having an existence of her own. Her apparent reason for existence was to bear children and stay at home.

As concern for Chicano rights began to swell, as Chicanos became politically active in promoting their cause, the Chicana also began to emerge from behind her patio wall and began to speak as a distinct individual. As she began to assume some "non-traditional" roles, observers decided that perhaps an investigation into the patterns of the Chicana's life would be enlightening. Various questions were asked and are being asked in this research. Some of these questions are: What has been the traditional role of the Chicana? Is this role changing? If so, how, and to what degree? Do the values of the present generation differ from their mothers' values and those of previous generations? Is the family structure going to be deeply affected by this apparent change in values?

The title of this paper is "The Chicana: Traditional Values in Transition." After reading about Chicanas and talking with them, the authors feel a more accurate title could be: "The Chicana: Reassessing her role in a transitional society." It is the conclusion of the authors of this paper that the Chicana's basic values are not changing at the

deepest level. She is, however, necessarily changing and adjusting her role in order to adapt to a rapidly changing society. As one Chicana woman stated succintly, "I still value home and family, but like you I have to adapt to a changing world and find new ways of expressing the basic values."[1]

What forces molded the Chicana? Why is she the way she is? There are no definitive answers; but perhaps a historical review will place her in perspective.

The Chicana is the American heiress to the cultural and historical legacies of ancient and modern worlds. She is a woman in transition; a woman in quest of her identity amidst a quagmire of rapid social change.[2] Her identity has been blurred, one possible result of colonization, since the overculture has attempted to pressure the minority member into conforming with its norm. Extensive variations in the realities of her lifestyle and experience do exist in the United States. She may have arrived from Mexico yesterday, or her ancestors may have been in the United States since 1520 or before. She may be urban, rural, poor or middle class. She may be a migrant or a teacher.[3] She does share, however, some basic roots in the development of Indian and Spanish culture. The historical experience of colonization and impoverished circumstances have marked her role with constraint and silence imposed by tradition, ignorance, and by her own sense of love, dedication and loyalty.

To discover the origins of the hazy self-image held by the Chicana, events must be traced to the discovery of the new world. Chicanas are the direct heirs of the subjugation of women of the valley of Mexico to the Spanish conquerors. The resulting social structure of the Mexican society, and that of the other lands conquered by the Spaniards reflected

views of the Catholic Church on women and native peoples.[4] The Spanish woman with her white complexion was likened to the Virgin Mary who embodied purity. The native women, on the other hand, were regarded as heathen to be exploited without consequence. Thus, the Indian females were to become the sexual objects of their conquerors as the population of Mexico became economic and political objects of the Spaniards. The migration of Mexicans in large numbers to the north did not mark the end of their colonization experience. It simply meant that Mexicans, having internalized a past colonial experience, added a second one to their existence.

It can be assumed from the writings of historians that whatever Hispanics existed in the Southwest after the time of the Anglo conquest in the 1840's carried strains combining Indian cultures, Mexican, Mestizo and Spanish. Historian Carey McWilliams points out that while the model in lifestyle was Spanish, the ultimate adaptation showed unmistakable Mexican and Indian influences.[5] The culture became a whole consisting of interwoven parts. Frances Swadesh addressed the role of the Hispanic woman in the southwest in Los Primeras Pabladores. He stated that the Spanish code regarding women in relation to men applied only theoretically, because the hardships of frontier conditions and low population made the traditional sexual division of labor impossible to maintain.[6] Women and children planted crops, irrigated fields and harvested, while men engaged in mining or herding livestock in distant pastures. Although the Spanish code of domesticity is still internalized by the Chicana of today who continues to see her primary task to be the bearing and rearing of children, the realities of the economic situation force many to step beyond their domestic roles in order to help augment family income.[7]

The historical patterns of work and settlement of Mexican immigrants have had far reaching effects on the assimilative patterns of the minority group. Unlike European immigrants who typically entered American society in cities with ready access to political institutions, schools for their children, and contact with the larger system, the Mexican American found himself isolated from the larger society due to the economic importance of farming and mining in the Southwest. His occupation afforded little contact with the larger community. This factor, plus his initial confinement to the Southwest region, has enabled him to escape national attention for many years.

As a group Mexican Americans are highly differentiated from the dominant society on nearly every yardstick of social and economic position. Any profile of their main demographic characteristics reveals large variations from the dominant society norms. One major difference is in mean age and size of families. Census data gives the median age of the Chicana as 19.6. This is ten years younger than the national median age.[8] The harsh life of poverty with its accompanying poor diet plus the tendency of Mexican Americans to have larger families is given as the reason for fewer Hispanic women surviving to advanced years.

The 1970 census revealed that Chicano families have become predominantly urban dwellers and that 85% of their population now live in cities.[9] That same census revealed that 28% of Mexican Americans are functional illiterates, compared to 15% of nonwhites, and 4% of Anglos.[10]

The Mexican American family has been the departure point for most of the research conducted on the Hispanic culture. The family has been praised for providing the one stable element for Chicanos, and then just as often, blamed for their lack of development. The extended kin system present in the Hispanic society has been linked causally to curtailing

mobility by sustaining emotional attachments to people, places and things. Thus, the family structure is viewed by some, most of whom operate from an Anglo perspective, to be a deterrent to progress of a collective or individual nature. The male role has received the greatest attention by scholars who have tended to ignore the female in their research, or who have briefly characterized her as a homemaker and mother who only obeys the commands of her husband. A thorough understanding of the positions occupied by both the male and female within the Hispanic family is essential to an understanding of the impact which changing female roles are having within the society.

The patriarchal ideal and the cultural emphasis on masculinity have dictated that the male role be characterized by masculine potency and dominance. The traditionally held belief is that power and prestige are the absolute prerogatives of the male in the Mexican American household. Within this cultural context women are provided with their roles by virture of their age or their relationship to men.[11] Thus, it becomes necessary for the wife to fill the role of the submissive, unworldly, unquestioning being long conditioned to self sacrifice. The preservation of the male self image depends on his wife's fulfillment of the traditional, historical and cultural dictates of her role, since he receives feedback reinforcing his masculinity largely from this interpersonal relationship.

It is the contention of some that the overculture has in large part dictated these respective roles to members of the oppressed minority by maintaining the male and female self image through stereotyping in the media, and further by proclaiming that scientific testing has verified the truth of the existence of this masculinity pattern. The resultant internalization of the stereotypes provided by members of the dominant

group is seen as problematic because it locks the minority member into the role expected by the overculture. For example, social science researchers may have reinforced these roles by describing what is called "machismo" a masculinity syndrome particularly attributable to the Latin mold, and thus, by extension to the Chicano male.[12] An example of this assertion is Robert Hayden's statement in regard to the pattern of supreme male dominance found in Mexican American families where individualism and pride on the part of the male are inherent to the role, and wife-beating is not uncommon.[13] In 1964 William Madsen, an anthropologist, made these comments relative to the status of the Mexican father in the United States:

> To a large extent, the supremacy of the male within his own home compensates for subservience he may have to demonstrate on the job.[14]

Sociologist Fernando Penalosa disagrees with the findings concerning the Chicano family structure of many social scientists, because he doesn't believe the Hispanic family has been subject to any systematic analysis that supports conclusions drawn about the "machismo" syndrome. He further states that the empirical data and an adequate theoretical framework do not exist as yet to carry out the task.[15]

Miguel Montiel is also critical of the methodological procedures utilized in previous studies. He states that such studies lack sound operational definitions and are filled with value laden concepts like "machismo" which lack empirical referents. He says that as a result, the theories postulated about Chicano male supremacy and absolute self sacrifice of the mother lack validity.[16]

While bearing in mind the effect of colonization on self image, it is equally important to consider the possible consequence that extremely impoverished conditions must have on the self image of the male who considers an expectation of his role to be that of family provider. Vicissitudes of employment, the seasonal character of work, and long periods of unemployment are problematic to the male's maintenance of his self image as the head of the household. He becomes forced to preserve a positive conception of himself and his role in society despite low income, poor occupational status, and the tendency of the larger society to regard him as a second class citizen. If myths are born out of a psychological drive to reconcile fact and desire, and often have their origins in deprivation and the inability to control one's life,[17] then it would surely seem possible that the Hispanic patriarchal idea having its origin in Spanish historical legacy could represent a longing for a type of life not discoverable in the reality of existence. Thus, the tendency to romanticize traditional ideals regarding domestic tasks of a devoted wife and mother becomes an essential defensive tool to ward off the threat that a man who feels permanently relegated to poverty, and is conditioned by this hopeless outlook must endure daily. Enriqueta Longauex y Vasquez addresses this issue in an article entitled "The Mexican American Woman" when she states that a male who is unable to fight the system (discrimination, unemployment, etc.) very often loses face and deserts his family, because he cannot fulfill role expectations, and is, therefore, forced to leave rather than allow the total destruction of his self image.[18]

Thus, the stance of masculine aggressiveness is viewed here as essentially a defensive one serving to ward off potential threats to

the Hispanic's fragile hold over his subsistence resources. This stance is articulated individually and collectively by males and females, for what is at stake is the survival of families, and consequently the survival of the Chicano culture. Mr. Eloy Huerta, Administrative Assistant at the Mexican American Cultural Center in Oklahoma City, stated that he felt economic factors were primarily responsible for the role occupied by the male in the Chicano family.[19]

While it is true that the traditional role of the Hispanic woman has been that of housewife and mother whose main purpose in life is to serve and assist her man, it is also true that the incredible strengths of her character have often been overlooked.[20] Though the importance of her role may be recognized only privately, her power in the domestic sphere is extensive, if power may be defined as the ability to act effectively on persons or things, without public recognition being a requirement. The Chicano family, despite extreme poverty, has survived as a close family unit primarily because of the efforts of the mother.[21] Elizabeth Sutherland expressed the necessity of the woman's role in the Mexican American family clearly:

> When your race is fighting for survival--to eat, to be clothed, to be housed, to be left in peace--as a woman, you know who you are. You are the principle of life, of survival, of endurance. The family is a source of strength for a people whose identity is constantly being whittled away. The mother is the center of that fortress.[22]

The introduction of strength into the character and role of the Chicana is in direct conflict with the pervasive stereotypes held in regard to her. Some popular misconceptions about the Chicana are now

generalizations that paint her as either a masochistic, non-intelligent wife with a flock of children gathered at her side, or as a sloven, brazen, generally undesirable personage. A clarification of her role within the Hispanic culture is necessary. Adaljisa Sosa Riddell states forcefully:

> These stereotypes have little meaning to those of us who have lived the reality of the Chicana existence. Within our memories is the image of the father who worked long hours at menial jobs and suffered to keep his family alive and maintain his dignity. Mothers worked in the fields or at menial labor in addition to caring for home and family. Submissiveness, chastity and unworldliness are luxuries of the rich.[23]

The mother, whose role is the central one within the domain of kinship, occupies a position of extreme importance in the Chicano family structure. According to the definition of matrifocal provided by Rosaldo and Lamphere, the Mexican American household is indeed a matrifocal one, since the role of mother is powerful, economically significant, and culturally central within the extended family situation. Matrifocal is not negatively defined by the absence of the father. Instead it is positively determined by examining the image of the mother and ascertaining the cultural value and content assigned to the role.[24] In the Hispanic household the woman acknowledges male authority due to recognition of the damage that the economic situation has done to the male ego. She is thus reluctant to risk threatening his self respect further.[25] In terms of actual choices and decisions, the power excercised by the woman has a considerable and systematic effect. The Chicana may remain in the home, but she controls the subsistence economy in her

assigned role of household manager. Children observe that it is their mothers who feed, instruct and indulge them.[26] Children see their mothers as responsible and important figures who work hard and take care of most family affairs. Daughters are socialized for this future role which requires much strength.[27] In the matrifocal household there is emphasis on the mother-child bond, and the capacity for mother-child units to function effectively on their own is implied.[28] Historically, rural working patterns of the Chicano which required his absence from the home for long hours or days may have given rise to this matrifocal situation.

The prevalent stereotype of the Mexican American woman as being submissive, disadvantaged, deficient and deprived is not applicable. Her strength can no longer be overlooked for she has achieved a high degree of familial stability in the midst of tragic socioeconomic conditions. The pervasive stereotypes held by members of the dominant culture have not been without consequence to the Chicana, however, Martha Cotera states that the real tragedy of the Chicana's future is that as pressing as her economic problems are, the real barriers to development are matters of "image" and "self-concept" since the Chicana has practically been paralyzed by the identity awarded to her by the dominant reference group.[29] Cotera goes on to emphasize the importance of discovery by the Chicana of her valued status in her home and community. She says it may take a new Mestizo race four hundred years to stabilize, but the Chicana is therein the family discovering, building, and restructuring her life as the need arises. It would seem that the time has come for the dominant culture to look at the Chicana for what she is.

Any discussion of the Hispanic woman's role and status would be incomplete without reference to the influence of the Catholic Church. Feminists regard the Roman Catholic Church as an obscenity -- an all male hierarchy, that presumes to rule on the lives and bodies of millions of women.[30] In contrast, Chicanas, the majority of whom are Catholic, regard the church as one form of the presence of God on earth. The Church presents vigorous anti-feminist opposition and continues to reinforce the belief that a woman's place is in the home, and exerts considerable influence on the lives of its female members.

Maria Chavez, Program Director of Oklahoma City's Mexican American Cultural Center, stated that due to the religious overtones of the culture, subordinance for women is bound into their role.[31] Virginia Hernandez, a Protestant minister's wife from Lubbock, Texas, contends that the influence of the Catholic Church on Mexican American women in the United States is small. Furthermore, she states that the only influence is in the area of birth control prohibition, and that younger women are even disregarding this ban as their educational status is improved. This observation may be valid only for her circle of acquaintances, since she was not brought up in the Catholic Church and her associates include mostly women who have definitely left the Catholic Church and, therefore, no longer feel the strength of the Catholic Church in their lives. Mrs. Hernandez herself strongly reaffirmed our own belief regarding the difficulty of applying general statements to the Chicana, and cautioned all who are doing research within the Chicano realm to be careful not to over-generalize. When asked if her values differed from her mother's, she replied: "I don't know. I was an orphan, but I know what my mother's sisters think, and they're all different. You can't pigeonhole the Chicana."[32]

Teresa, who is the daughter of a migrant worker, also is married to a minister and is a grade school teacher. She worked her way through college, the first ever in her family to do so. Her views on her role are different from what is traditionally believed to be true, yet she says her values are the traditional ones. She says "If I work outside the home, he (my husband) can work inside the home."[33] She says that education is having a terrific influence on changing the way young Chicana women feel. Teresa and Virginia fear that this change will bring about the dissolution of the extended family household which they believe has been very important in the stability of the Mexican-American family. These women appreciate the Chicano movement for the consciousness it is raising about their culture and heritage. They are very proud of their heritage and want their children to be proud also. These women have felt the sting of prejudice but they have great pride and see themselves "as good as anyone is." This feeling of pride was what enabled Teresa to complete a college degree in the face of what would appear to be overwhelming odds. Now she is facing a familiar battle - not wanting to give her children too much, wanting them to earn their education and be appreciative, yet also not wanting them to struggle as she did. Teresa's basic values are still her family and home, though she is living her role in a way dramatically different on the outside from her mother. However, her mother also worked outside the home to help support the family, though it was migrant crop-harvesting, back-breaking labor. Each one has worked for her family in the best way available to her.

Teresa, Virginia and Pat an Anglo woman who married a Chicano, agree that the authoritarian home where father's word is law is slowly changing,

and that discipline and control are becoming more a matter to be shared between mother and father. They say the influence of the dominant Anglo culture is so pervasive it would be impossible to live in a vacuum and not change. However, they say that situations in Mexico are also changing, though more slowly than for the Mexican-American in the United States.[34] These three women are probably atypical of the vast majority of uneducated Mexican-American women, today, however, as the education level of Chicanas increases, their stories may become more representative of the majority. Also, it must be stated that the husbands of these women are well educated professional men, who undoubtedly have been greatly influenced by their education in the dominant culture. These men can provide for their families, they do have standing in the community, so they do not have the same battles to fight as the uneducated, unwanted migrant worker male. These women and their families are typical only of the small upwardly mobile, well educated minority, which will continue to grow.

Another influence for change is the increasing intermarriage of Hispanics with non-Hispanics.[35] Pat Rosas, and her husband are examples of this increasing phenomenon. The Hispanics have resisted assimilation for many years, but assimilation is seen as inevitable by most of the Mexican-Americans interviewed in this study. The women who are wives of professional men (July 26 interview) seem to feel that they are having the best of two worlds, an exciting heritage which makes them unique and special, facility in two languages, and professional opportunities in the United States. This generation is able to meld these two cultures: what the outcome will be in the subsequent generation, is still unknown.

One woman who felt she was not able to discover her own identity within her own culture, Helen Cuadrado, a university clerical worker, said she felt compelled to discover more about herself than her traditional role within the confines of a Hispanic marriage would allow. She was unable to resolve the problem within the context of the Chicano culture and had to "break away." In doing so she became divorced and gave up Catholicism. Ms. Cuadrado stated that her family now regards her as "Americanized."[36] Although she maintained that the Chicanos of the present will not allow the female to develop her own identity within the Mexican American cultural context, she expressed hope that a new generation of Chicanos will feel differently regarding the female role. Her manner of handling the situation was not entirely to her satisfaction, and she continues to feel an affinity for many aspects of the heritage she felt compelled to leave behind. Ms. Cuadrado also supports the belief of others interviewed in this study; dissolution of the extended family household could severely alter the stability of the Mexican American family. Since the family is seen by herself and many others as being the most critical socializing agency within a culture because it is the vehicle upon which transmission of cultural heritage depends, Ms. Cuadrado hopes that the structure of the family can be altered enough to allow for growth and development of the Chicana's role without destruction of the Mexican American family's stability, and its consequent ramifications for maintenance of cultural identity.

It is our conclusion that the Chicana is making adjustments in her role that coincide with the implementation of the sweeping social changes of the sixties and seventies in the United States. These alterations in the Chicana's conventional role may not be as large as

it appears superficially to the casual observer. The strength and determination present in her character today have alays been there enabling her and her family to withstand incredible hardships. The Chicana often works outside of the home today, but so did many of her predecessors who worked long hours in the fields in order to ensure survival of their families.

Educational opportunities for women in minorities exist today that have allowed members of the Chicano culture to begin the climb up the socio-economic ladder. Across the existing multitudinous differences in lifestyles of the Chicanas in this country, however, there exists a common desire among those interviewed to maintain and preserve cultural identity. In part of that heritage resides a deep commitment to the home and family. The authors of this paper do not sense any desire on the part of the Chicana to break away from these traditional values. The Chicana is still working for her family and her people whenever possible in the best way available to her; only the sphere of opportunity has changed.

NOTES

[1]Personal interview, Carolyn Waterman with Teresa Sandoval, 26 July, 1979.

[2]Noemi Lorenzana, "La Chicana: Transcending the Old and Carving Out a New Life and Self Image," De Colores, Vol. 2, No. 3 (1976), p. 6.

[3]Martha Cotera, Profile on the Mexican American Woman (Austin: National Educational Laboratory Publishers, Inc., 1976), p. 4.

[4]Adaljiza Sosa Riddell, "Chicanas and El Movimiento," AZTLAN, 5(1974), p. 158.

[5]Cotera, p. 51.

[6]Cotera, p. 52.

[7]Leo Crebler, Joan Moore, and Ralph C. Gusman, The Mexican American People the Nation's Second Largest Minority (New York: Free Press, 1970), p. 366.

[8]Cotera, p. 121.

[9]Cotera, p. 120.

[10]Cotera, p. 122.

[11]Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, Woman, Culture, and Society (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), p. 29.

[12]Adaljiza Sosa Riddell, p. 156.

[13]Robert G. Hayden, "Spanish Americans of the Southwest: Life Style Patterns and Their Implications," Welfare in Review, Vol. 4, No. 10 (April, 1966), p. 20.

[14]William Madsen, The Mexican Americans of South Texas (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964), p. 48.

[15]Cotera, p. 150.

[16]Miguel Montiel, "The Social Science Myth of the Mexican American Family," in Voices Readings from El Grito ed. Octavio Romano (Berkeley: Quento Sol Publications, Inc., 1971), p. 62.

[17]Elizabeth Janeway, Man's World, Woman's Place A Study in Social Mythology (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1971), p. 26.

[18]Enriqueta Longauex y Vasquez, "The Mexican American Woman," in Sisterhood Is Powerful an Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement ed. Robin Morgan (New York: Random House, 1970), p. 381.

[19]Personal interview Debbie Johnson with Eloy Heurta, 27 November 1978.

[20]Linda Aguilar, "Unequal Opportunities and the Chicana," Civil Rights Digest, Vol. 5, No. 4 (1973), p. 31.

[21]Cecilia Suarez, "Sexual Stereotypes: Psychological and Cultural Survival," Regeneracion, Vol. 2, No. 3 (1973), p. 21.

[22]Elizabeth Sutherland, "Colonized Women: The Chicana," in Sisterhood Is Powerful an Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement ed. Robin Morgan (New York: Random House, 1970), p. 377.

[23]Adaljiza Sosa Riddell, p. 156.

[24]Rosaldo and Lamphere, p. 131.

[25]Sutherland, p. 377.

[26]Rosaldo and Lamphere, p. 139.

[27]Rosaldo and Lamphere, p. 153.

[28]Rosaldo and Lamphere, p. 156.

[29]Cotera, p. 197.

[30]Robin Morgan, Sisterhood Is Powerful An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement (New York: Random House, 1970), p. 19.

[31]Personal Interview, Debbie Johnson with Maria Chavez, 27 November 1978.

[32]Personal interview, Carolyn Waterman with Virginia Hernandez, 26 July 1979.

[33]Personal interview, Carolyn Waterman with Teresa Sandoval, 26 July 1979.

[34]Personal interview, 26 July 1979.

[35]Grebler, Moore, and Guzman, p. 408.

[36]Personal interview, Debbie Johnson with Helen Cuadrado, 27 November 1978.

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